DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 630 CS 508 065

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TITLE It Was the Best of Times: A Justification for Message-Based Performances in Oral Interpretation Competition.
PUB DATE 29 Oct 92
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (78th, Chicago, IL, October 29-November 1, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Response; Communication Skills; Higher Education; *Oral Interpretation; *Persuasive Discourse; Public Speaking; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Debate Tournaments; *Message Based Performances; Text Factors

ABSTRACT

If forensic oral interpretation selections are to communicate to audiences, forensics educators must first help their students discover the messages that exist within texts and are communicated through programming and performance. The concepts of relevancy, significance, and depth of insight provide a general background for which aesthetic communication can effectively occur. Relevancy refers to the pertinence a performance has to current social forces. Significance is the yard stick to rule out trivial or inconsequential themes or topics. Depth of insight provides a personal meaning for the audience member, who leaves the performance enriched with a new understanding about the human experience. A criteria relating to the quality of message provided by the performance (selection of literature, programming, introduction, and performance) serves as a beginning to message-based interpretation evaluation. If forensics is to be truly educational, then educators must insist that their students utilize literature as a means of discovery, recognizing the messages that exist through significant, relevant and insightful experiences. (RS)

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It Was the Best of Times: A Justification for Message-Based Performances in Oral Interpretation Competition

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Contributed Paper
sponsored by the
American Forensic Association

presented at the
Seventy-Eighth Annual Meeting
of the
Speech Communication Association
Forensics Division
Chicago, Illinois

Thursday, October 29, 1992

CS508065

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i wanted to write
a poem
that rhymes
but revolution doesn't lend
itself to be-bopping

then my neighbor
who thinks i hate
asked -- do you ever write
tree poems -- i like trees
so i thought

i'll write a beautiful green tree poem
peeked from my window
to check the image
noticed the school yard was covered
with asphalt
no green = no trees grow
in manhattan

then, well, i thought the sky
i'll do a big blue sky poem

but all the clouds have winged
low since no Dick was elected

so i thought again
and it occurred to me
maybe i shouldn't write
at all

but clean my gun
and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic
times
at all

"For Saundra" by Nikki Giovanni (1968)

Much thought has been given to the new face of oral interpretation. The newly-bloomed field of Performance Studies brings with it new concepts and responsibilities for interpreters, taking them beyond performance and into the realm of aesthetic communication (Fine, Speer 1977). Though the qualities of analysis and performance of literary texts are still valued, there is now a greater emphasis on *dialogic engagement* -- a dialogue through aesthetic texts between the text and the audience via the performer (Pelias, 1992). Under this view, performance of text employs far more skills than the understanding of text and the ability to perform it effectively. New emphasis is now placed on the ability to analyze audiences, messages, themes, and language strategies within texts in order to create a response from the audience -- a message fully received.

Though the field of Interpretation has made such radical changes, Forensics has been slow to follow, despite calls from scholars to make adaptations (Miller-Rassulo, 1988; Koeppel & Morman, 1991). Little has been written to rethink the evaluative process for oral interpretation competition under these new paradigms, or expand the concepts now being published in order to further develop competition in oral interpretation. Even current writing ignores a much more central concern for an activity that occurs alongside more traditional speech communication events: the *message* of the performance, or what Jay VerLinden (1983) might call the "critical claim" made by the interpreter's introduction and performance of text. Though much has been presented focusing oral interpretation toward an argumentative form, especially in the use of the introduction (Koeppel & Morman, 1991), we must first recognize the importance of the message provided by the literature itself and developed through the performer, the introduction, and the performance.

National or local forensic tournament rules have never insisted that an oral interpretation event have any message, whether argumentative or demonstrative in nature. Competitive practice in oral interpretation still carries primary focus on the quality of performance (or more realistically, the performer), with little thought as to the quality of the *thought* presented via the performance. Literature, under this view, is a means to an end -- the right vehicle to show off a performer's talents. Yet, in contrast, a persuasive or extemporaneous speech could never rely solely on performance to be competitively successful if its message was vague, irrelevant, and unrelatable to its audience.

Moving oral interpretation competition conceptually closer to the field of Performance Studies and the concept of aesthetic communication yields several positive outcomes. I personally grow weary of hearing disparaging remarks from public address coaches who are convinced that oral interpretation requires little "brain power" compared to communication analysis, extemporaneous or persuasive speaking. Though we might contest this view on many fronts, the reality is that interpretation preparation has rarely consisted of discussion surrounding current social issues and communication theories. Scholars in both Performance Studies and forensics argue for such discussion (Pelias, 1992; Hershey, 1987). Interpretation that is message-based also provides us with an evaluative structure that is less vague or subjective and is more in line with the evaluative aspects of public address, allowing more judging consistency between public address and oral interpretation, since tournament judges are often called to evaluate both sets of events.

In an effort to continue movement toward competitive oral interpretation that is message-based, this essay offers a possible foundation to evaluating such performances in contest interpretation. For many judges, this foundation is not a radical departure from current evaluative practices. For these judges and coaches, it is the hope of the author that discussion surrounding these issues will provide justification for such practices. Rather than provide hard rules about the content or message quality of any given performance, we might be better served exploring some concepts that provide a general background for which aesthetic communication can effectively occur. I will offer three overlapping concepts:

relevancy, significance, and depth of insight. An elaboration of these concepts will lead us to potential applications to competitive performances and a suggested list of evaluative criteria for oral interpretation that rewards message quality alongside quality of performance.

Relevancy

By relevancy, I refer to the pertinence a performance has to current social forces. A selection performed in Poetry, Prose, Duo, Dramatic Interp and certainly Program should be relevant much as a speech topic is relevant, relating to the times in which we live. The topic of the literature should share an experience that reflects or gives insight into the many competing aspects of our world.

As is illustrated in the Giovanni poem, all literature is a product of its time. Under the sociological viewpoint, literature reflects the social forces that mold the author and ultimately, the message of the piece (Abcarian and Klotz, 1990). Though Romeo and Juliet may be a timeless and classic tragedy, it too is a product of the time of its creation. Though the theme is universal, adaptations such as West Side Story add a sense of relevancy to a more recent time and culture. It is interesting to note, however, that this "modern" version seems equally outdated and unrelatable in 1993. The exploits of the Jets and the Sharks are laughable to anyone who has witnessed the recent violence of gang activity in major urban centers.

If, then, literature reflects the times of its creation, then the message of the literature is also bound by time in that it represents the experiences of that time, regardless of universal theme. We could argue that The Shadow Box by Michael Cristofer, though dealing with the timeless theme of death, was relevant particularly at the time it was published. Hospice programs, especially for cancer patients, were somewhat of a novelty. Likewise, theories on how terminally ill patients and their families handled loss and grief were also just gaining popularity. However well written, the play simply offers less relevant experiences as it did ten years ago. Cancer prevention and education has taken us to new levels of understanding about the disease and the horrors surrounding treatment. We now have greater concerns as a society over newer, equally deadly illnesses. Though this doesn't mean we can no longer enjoy the quality of writing offered by The Shadow Box, the message provided by it offers as much new insight as a speech on the dangers of salt.

In the same vein, the modern AIDS epidemic has created a constantly evolving river of literature, first from the homosexual community and then from a variety of affected cultures. The nature of the literature has also changed over the past decade, from poems, stories and plays focusing on the constant death in these communities to the new lifestyles created by the epidemic. Poems, filled with description designed to shock us, in which a once vital gay man lies dying in a hospital bed, no longer holds the originality of thought to shock or move us. We've seen the image too many times. It has become a fact of life that we have begrudgingly accepted. More

importantly, as the disease has progressed, the experiences have changed, and we as an audience have grown in our interests and attitudes about it.

Relevancy, then, relates to both the selection of literature as well as the introduction to the performance which helps us focus on the insight gained by the literature. The interpreter, wishing to use literature to communicate, looks around his or her world and asks, "What's going on? What is my world about today?" The answers are endless, from the positive influences of recaptured family values or the end of the cold war to the growing concerns over economic stability, crime, or violence. She or he then investigates a variety of literary sources and finds a piece that shares a particular experience or insight, perhaps comparing it to other sources of information such as news reports or editorial opinions. The same amount of time in literary analysis and rehearsal must then occur; the piece must be performed well if it is to provide insight. The introduction is carefully written. "What did the piece teach me about my world? How can I help my audience gain the same insight?" Through this approach, the performer uses literature to explore and understand some aspect of life, much like a speaker would research a topic. Rather than justifying a piece of literature that performs well by labelling the piece thematically in the introduction, the student shares the insights gained through literary research.

Yet, relevancy can also be explored in relation to themes as well. We can easily recognize that even such general themes as love, romance, family, greed, hunger and depression take on new meanings as we enact them in our modern world. Certainly, an interpreter wishing to explore the theme of parent/child relationships would find the experiences documented in selections such as Life With Father or Cheaper By The Dozen as non-relevant. Families today live under different values, structures, pressures and rituals. Though the exploration with these selections might provide insight into an era gone by, the relevant message can only be, "This is how things used to be. They're not like that any more."

Significance

Yet, not all effective pieces of literature are relevant socially or culturally. Some pieces reflect different times and places that don't relate to our lives at all but enthrall us nonetheless. I read Fanny Flagg's Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe and, tears streaming down my face, didn't find a single word relevant to my life or world, except perhaps my love of food. A second concept must also be addressed, therefore, when determining the quality of the message provided by the performance: significance.

It might be argued that the field of forensics has turned the concept of significance into an art form. Yet, with so many messages competing for the attention of a judge and audience, significance is a fair evaluative measure. We might argue that a topic is significant because it carries a degree of importance -- it affects us in some way. Significance is the yard stick to rule

out trivial or inconsequential themes or topics that don't enrich us or seem worth our attention. Given the realities of information overload in a media-trained world, significance may be of growing value, helping us to decide what should get our attention and concentration.

We would hope, in our student's quest to better understand their world through the telescope of literature, that our student's search uncovers significant issues and experiences, represented in literature that explores significant themes or situations. Beyond the quality of construction, significance asks the performer to determine the quality of the message itself. Is it important? Does it show us something we really need to see? Does it affect our lives in some way? The answers will be reflected in the *source* of the selection and the selection itself. Just as we might reject an Informative topic that appears trivial and inconsequential, so should we hold back reward for the prose that has nothing important to share with the audience and serves only as mindless entertainment.

Significance does not need to relate specifically, however, to the action provided in a given piece of literature. Perhaps the heroine doesn't always have to die in order for a piece to be important. No startling revelation may ever occur or earth-shattering message spoken. Significance may simply be found in the types of questions explored by the literature, or the thoughts it provokes. The light comedy Lettice and Lovage by Peter Shaffer, for example, makes a significant statement about our lack of respect for age, heritage, quality and tradition. Though never directly stated or advocated through specific action, the theme emerges clearly and provokes thought, through our laughter, about our own attitudes concerning the elderly and the place they have in our society.

Again, the introduction can also serve to help identify the significance of a selection, whether in providing a claim of argument or an explanation of demonstrated fact. In this way, significance becomes a personal belief or conviction of the interpreter, who claims, "This is important to me -- this has special meaning to me." It also forces the interpreter to analyze the audience, determining what themes, messages or experiences will be perceived as significant to any given group.

Depth of Insight

Significant and relevant messages in literature provide us with another important quality: depth of insight. Through a well-crafted piece of literature, we can better understand an aspect of the world around us or the way people live their lives. Whether directly stated or implied, this insight provides a personal meaning for the audience member, who leaves the performance enriched with a new understanding about the human experience.

Let's return to the reality of gang violence. An interpreter exploring this relevant and significant reality might look for literature that both defines the reality, argues a claim about the reality, or simply provides insight into

the thoughts and emotions surrounding that reality. Perhaps a poem shows the fears a young gang member must hide from his fellow brothers on the night he first shoots a rival member. Though the poem may be significant and relevant, the thoughts expressed must also offer a depth of insight, allowing the audience (through a quality performance) to fully understand the emotions and experience, even though they may be unable to personally relate to it.

Insight is gained not only by what a piece of literature might *say* about a given experience, but in the demonstration and creation of shared emotive response, showing us how an experience *feels*. The audience is enriched by the emotive response created in the performance -- we actually get to feel the feelings associated with this experience by watching the performer's emotional reactions. This is certainly not to say that depth of insight is equal to intensity of emotion. However, appropriate emotive responses to significant and relevant experiences offer an enriching experience for both the performer and the audience.

M. Butterfly by David Henry Hwang serves as a good example here. Though the subject matter is not necessarily relevant to current social forces or individual experiences, the play is itself enriching in the insight it provides to a variety of themes: love, need, denial, fantasy. Though the insight gained for the audience is less valuable when applied directly (what the piece has taught us about sustaining a relationship with a male Geisha), indirect or thematic insight about the fantasies our needs create for us is very enriching, and provides indirect insight into our own relationships. Again, the role of the introduction is important, so that insight can be directed.

Evaluative Criteria

As momentum is gained toward aesthetic communication as a primary goal of oral interpretation, whether as argumentative or demonstrative in nature, of crucial importance is a clear set of new criteria for the evaluation and ranking of competitive oral interpretation events. In addition to conventional criteria surrounding the quality of performance both vocally and physically, the quality of literature in its form and style and the quality of analysis in the discovery of authors intent, I propose the following criteria relating to the quality of message provided by the performance overall:

1) Selection of Literature
   a. Does the literature represent relevant or significant thought on its subject?

   b. Is the selection timely? Does it address current thought, action, or attitude regarding its subject?

   c. Does the literature provide insight to human emotion or behavior, either intellectually, emotionally or spiritually?

2) Programming (Poetry, Prose, Program Oral Interp)

a. Does the literature of the program represent a range of thought or experience on the subject?

b. Does the program allow for multiple perspectives, implying critical thought on the subject?

c. Does the arrangement of the literature within the program develop and further enrich the message in some way?

d. Does the introductory/transitional material help us to see the message within the literature (without forcing a message into the literature)?

3) Introduction

a. Does the introduction allow the audience to better recognize the message within the literature?

b. Does the introduction connect the specific experiences within the literature to relevant or significant social forces?

c. Does the introduction provide insight or prepare the audience for a specific insight?

4) Performance

a. Is content and message fully realized in performance? Does the performer allow the literature to enrich us or assist the literature in some way?

b. Does the performer overstep the message or experience through the use of entertaining affect or display?

c. Is the performance consistent with the message, theme, or experience implied with the text?

This list is in no way exhaustive, yet serves as a beginning to message-based interpretation evaluation. It is also important to note that subjectivity must still be a concern, as with all evaluation. A judge may easily conclude that a significant message does not exist in a piece of literature when in fact the judge simply disagreed or was in value conflict with the message conveyed.

Conclusion

In order for communication to exist, some form of message is necessary. If we expect, then, for forensic oral interpretation selections to communicate to their audiences, we must first help our students discover the messages that exist within texts and communicated through programming and performance. If forensics is to be truly educational, then we must insist that our students utilize literature as a means of discovery, recognizing the messages that exist through significant, relevant and insightful experiences. As the extemperaneous speaker goes to his or her file to discover the truth about the economy, war, or crime, the interpreter should go to the literary journal, the prose anthology, or the drama shelf to find the truth in human experiential terms. As the speaker relates the discovery of truth in the form of a thesis which is defended using evidence of fact and opinion, the interpreter must do the same, using the experiences provided in literature, with as deeply insightful, significant, and relevant a list of sources as demanded of the extemperaneous speaker.

As an attempt to see the concepts of aesthetic communication transform the current practices of competitive oral interpretation competition, this essay has provided both a beginning foundation to the concept of message-based interpretation, defining messages as both a product of the literature as well as the programming and performance provided by the interpreter. Finally, a beginning list of evaluative criteria were developed to apply these concepts into actual judging practice.

Progression of traditional thought in a field of study is never easy. Forensics can certainly applaud the efforts of scholars in the field of Performance Studies, yet accolades are most flattering in the form of imitation. It is time, finally, for forensic oral interpretation to realign its conventions to current thought. By doing so, the goals of the activity may be much better served.

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